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# Godless in Eden?

## The Metroscape's Post-Modern Religious Life

By Patricia Killen



Clockwise, from left:  
Portland Oregon Temple,  
LDS, Lake Oswego;  
St. Stephen's Catholic  
Church, Portland; Chinese  
Presbyterian Church,  
Portland; Apostolic Faith  
Tabernacle, Portland, and  
Temple Neveh Shalom,  
Portland.



Near the intersection of Highways 26 and 11 in downtown Sandy, Oregon, Celtic Spirit Yoga occupies a white wooden church complete with steeple. Its website describes the building, formerly home to an Episcopal congregation, as “the perfect place” to “share the joys of yoga,” because within it “generations have asked for blessings and offered gratitude” ([www.celticspiritryoga.com/pages/1/index.htm](http://www.celticspiritryoga.com/pages/1/index.htm)). Not far away, in Boring, Oregon, Good Shepherd Community Church, with a reported average weekly attendance of 3500, occupies a sprawling campus complete with landscaping and physical plant akin to a high-tech business. Its homepage features a panoramic photograph of Mount Hood viewed from a high forest clearing and lists events such

as a prayer institute in which people whose “need is total” can connect with a “Father” whose “resources are infinite” ([www.goodshepherdcc.org](http://www.goodshepherdcc.org)). Still closer to downtown Portland, on Southeast Foster Road, United States Atheists, an organization that “promotes atheism as a positive belief system” and ministers to the “needs of non-believers,” has its headquarters ([www.unitedstatesatheists.com](http://www.unitedstatesatheists.com)).

An independent proprietorship focused on eclectic spiritual quests, a fading historic Protestant denomination, a thriving suburban mega church, and a home base for organized atheism—these seemingly disparate entities are both old and new on the religious landscape of the Portland metro area. They exemplify long-standing patterns in the ways people in Oregon compose individual and corporate religious journeys—fluid, unfettered individual spiritual quests that for some coalesce into communal forms that provide structure, interpersonal connections and spiritual resources. At the same time, like the growing cone on Mount St. Helens, these groups are the crust of deeper activity, three decades of global, national, and local economic, social, and cultural change that has profoundly altered the surroundings for individual and institutional religion. Viewed against this horizon, the Portland metro area’s current religious contours help to explain Oregon’s notoriety for “godlessness” and for contentious public debate over issues from physician-assisted suicide to land-use regulation. As well, they reveal postmodern religious trends that increasingly will affect public life here and elsewhere.

### **Long-standing Patterns in an “Open” Religious Environment**

**M**ost people in the Portland metro area pursue personalized spiritual quests outside the doors of religious institutions and always have. It took until 1971 for Oregon’s 33% religious adherence figure (the portion of the population claimed by religious organizations) to approach that of the nation at 1890, 34.4%. In 2000, the state’s adherence rate was 35.2%, and the nation’s 59.5% ([religionatlas.org](http://religionatlas.org)). As the percentage of Oregon’s population claimed by religious organizations grew over a century plus, the percentage gap between Oregon’s adherence rate and that of the nation became larger.

Historians and sociologists suggest several factors in trying to explain why the population of Oregon and Washington has remained largely averse to institutional religion. Mobility is one. Physical mobility disrupts relationships and social

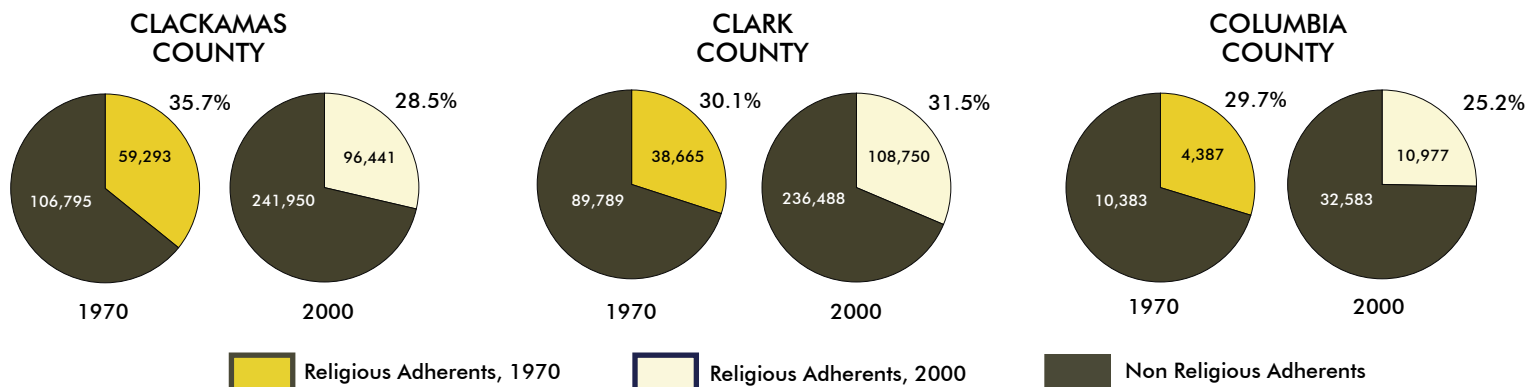
connections. Another is the West, figuratively and literally. Self-reliant individuals head west (or south or north or east, depending on their starting point), rarely seeking to replicate what they left behind, and expecting to succeed or fail on their own. On a quest for a better life, they keep their options open, a stance that impedes investment in social institutions. Hence, religious institutions, like other public or civic institutions in the region, lack the depth of investment on the part of the population that constitutes reliable social capital.

Historians point to another factor: the region never developed and sustained a strong cultural-religious hegemony. Beginning with a relatively thin population that has grown primarily through successive waves of in-migration, the religious and cultural face of the region always has been mixed and fluid. In any period, its public persona reflected the imported sensibility of economic and political elites alternately in tension or alignment with the cultures of newer in-migrants. To date, no wave of in-migration has sufficed to create a cultural-religious hegemony comparable to Puritans in New England or Lutherans and Catholics in the Upper Midwest. In the past decade, doing so has become an explicit agenda for some evangelicals in the region.

Finally, even early Christian missionaries to the region recognized that its space and beauty affect people. The natural environment dwarfs the human here. And while a century plus of records from various denominations bemoan that people are “scattered” and that the geography makes them “indifferent” to religion, many people saw and see it differently. For many, being in nature is a religious experience. And protecting nature, the environment, is their religious cause.

The Portland metro area, with an adherence rate of 37.39%, is, like the entire region, an “open” religious environment. With most people outside the doors, there is minimal social pressure to affiliate with religious organizations. Successive waves of in-migration continue to bring old and new forms of religious thought, practice, and organization into the area, but historically, even the churching population in the region has had little concern for inherited scriptural or theological heritages. Individuals and groups develop belief, practice, and sensibility freely. Some experiment and innovate, others seek to install an “eternal” or “timeless” religious vision onto a far western landscape unburdened by history.

The same open religious environment that is congenial to religious-seeking forces the question of religious identity and belonging to the front of consciousness. The other side of the openness that



supports unfettered, personalized religious quests is the glaring absence of a readily recognizable container for religious aspirations and expression. Everyone who enters the region is confronted with a set of tasks that involve clarifying the meaning of their own religious identity and practice, constructing webs of social relationships, and making sense of the place itself. Here, religious identity and belonging are an individual's life-long project. Religion takes work, and the spiritual taming of self or society is no less fraught with difficulty than was the conquest of the land and forests and indigenous peoples. It is no accident, then, that in the Portland metro area the question of boundaries—physical, social, cultural, human, religious, and spiritual—rarely are resolved.

The area's open religious environment must not be confused with an empty environment, however. Multiple forms of religious organization, stable and emergent, old and new, have co-existed in the region, albeit sometimes in balkanized, geographic isolation. The Portland metro area has long been home to Jewish synagogues, Catholic parishes, congregations of historic Protestant

denominations, and historically African-American churches. From their first appearance on the U.S. scene, Holiness and Pentecostal Christians have had better traction in the Pacific Northwest than in other regions outside of the South.

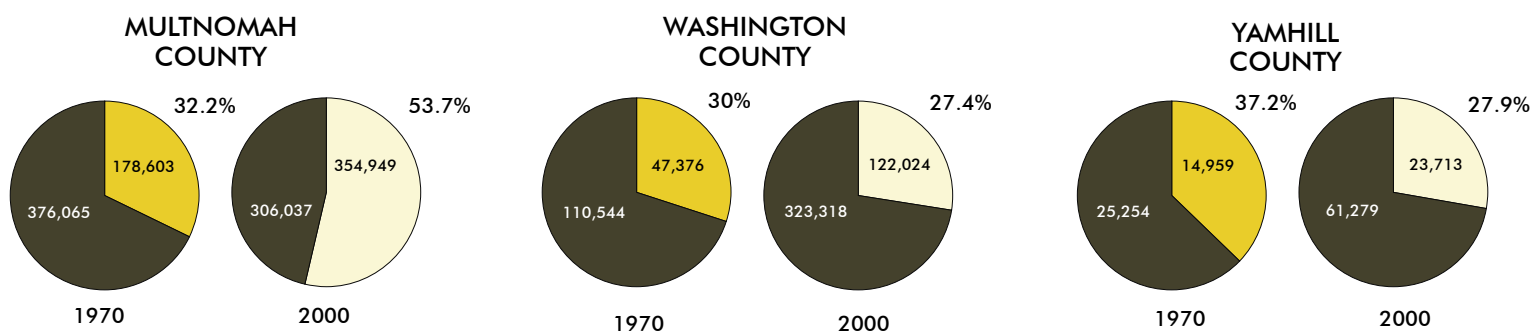
Today, the Portland metro area has more mega churches (congregations that regularly worship more than 2,000 weekly) than much more highly church-ed states like Alabama. Metro's suburban mega churches not only respond to the needs of primarily in-migrants to the region, they continue a century-long tradition of building large, gathering many, and offering powerful, visceral experiences of

the divine. Muslim, Buddhist, Russian Pentecostal and Hispanic Catholic immigrant communities continue a century-plus tradition of establishing religious-ethnic communities in the area. The Center for Spiritual Development at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral carries on in a newer form the historic Protestant denominations' long-standing work of bridging individual religious quests to concern for the broader public or common good.

The Portland metro area also is a center for



As church attendance has fallen, many church buildings have been converted to other uses. This former church and Masonic lodge in southeast Portland is now home to the Mazamas, a Portland-based mountain climbing organization.



## Seven Largest Religious Bodies/Families of Religious Bodies as Percent of Population by MetroScape County in 2000

CLACKAMAS 28.5% Adherents	CLARK 31.5% Adherents	COLUMBIA 25.2% Adherents	MULTNOMAH 53.7% Adherents	WASHINGTON 27.4% Adherents	YAMHILL 27.9% Adherents
Catholic, 6.3%	Catholic, 7.9%	Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 4.5%	Catholic, 22.7%	Catholic, 6.5%	Other Conservative Christian, 5.6%
Other Conservative Christian, 6.1%	Other Conservative Christian, 4.3%	Catholic, 4.4%	Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 5.8%	Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 4.2%	Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 4.9%
Latter Day Saints, 3.3%	Latter Day Saints, 4.1%	Latter Day Saints, 4.1%	Historically African American, 4%	Other Conservative Christian, 3.9%	Catholic, 4.4%
Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 3%	Holiness/Wesleyan/ Pentacostal, 4%	Other Conservative Christian, 4%	Eastern Religions, 3.2%	Latter Day Saints, 3.8%	Baptist, 3.6%
ELCA, 1.9%	Baptist, 2.9%	Baptist, 3.2%	Jewish, 2.9%	Baptist, 2%	Latter Day Saints, 3.3%
Baptist, 1.9%	ELCA, 1.1%	ELCA, 1.8%	Other Conservative Christian, 2.9%	Confessional/Reformed/ Non-UCC, 1.3%	United Methodists, 1.4%
United Methodists, 1%	United Methodists, 1.1% Historical African American Protestant, 1.1%	United Methodists, 0.8% Confessional/Reformed Non-UCC, 0.8%	Baptist, 2.8%	ELCA, 1.2%	ELCA, 0.9%

Source: *North American Religious Atlas* (religiousatlas.org), which supplemented *Religious Congregations and Membership 2000* with estimates for historically African American bodies and other religious groups.

**Other Conservative Christian** includes: Seventh-Day Adventists; Christian Churches and Churches of Christ; Independent Non-Charismatic; Churches of Christ; Evangelical Covenant Church; Evangelical Free Church.

**Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal** includes: Assemblies of God; International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; Church of the Nazarene; Independent Charismatic; Christian and Missionary Alliance; Church of God (Anderson, Indiana); Salvation Army; Free Methodist Church of North America; Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee); Wesleyan Church; Pentecostal Church of God; International Pentecostal Holiness Church; Church of God of Prophecy.

**Baptists** includes: Southern Baptists; Conservative Baptists; American Baptist Churches USA; Baptist General Conference; General Association of Regular Baptist Churches; North American Baptist Conference; American Baptist Association.

**Confessional/Reformed/Non-UCC** includes: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; Christian Reformed Church in North America; Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod; Reformed Church of America; National Association of Congregational Christian Churches; Association of Free Lutheran Congregations.

**Historically African American Protestant** includes: African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Christian Methodist Episcopal; Church of God in Christ; Fire Baptized Holiness Church; Black Baptists; African Methodist Episcopal Church.

**Eastern Religions** include: Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists, Jains, Bahais, Zoroastrians.

*Information for pie charts on page 8 are taken from North American Religion Atlas (religionatlas.org); Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000 (Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 20002); www.CensusScope.org.*

Wicca and other earth-based spirituality movements, and the site of the Annual Northwest Fall Equinox Festival. Businesses like the Renaissance Bookstore in Northwest of Portland have long served a clientele pursuing eclectic personal spiritual quests. Organizations such as the Living Enrichment Center in Wilsonville, Oregon, offer companionship on the “new spirituality” journey. Environmentalists, animal rights activities, and atheists articulate their causes in languages of meaning, larger-than-human contest, and purposefulness that resonate as “religious.”

Whatever their form, both older, well-established and newer, emergent forms of religious organization must contend with the Portland metro area’s open, fluid religious environment. In order to maintain themselves, all must appeal to individuals’ personal spiritual aspirations and offer a vision and experience of community that individuals will find compelling. Relevance, not habit or heritage, is

the glue of religious adherence in the Pacific Northwest, and always has been.

Further, because so few people are in religious organizations, and no single denomination or cluster of denominations, with the exception of Catholics in Multnomah county, is large enough to claim even 8% of the population, religious perspectives garner weight in debate over issues of public concern through formal alliances or affinity. Consequently, shifts in the configuration of the minority of the population within religious organizations have contributed to religion’s greater visibility and contested role in the metro area.

### A Reconfigured Religious Landscape and Its Consequences

From 1970 to 2000 the population of Clackamas, Clark, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties grew from 1, 076,133 to



## Top Six Denominations by Metroscapes County 1970 and 2000

CLACKAMAS		CLARK		COLUMBIA		MULTNOMAH		WASHINGTON		YAMHILL	
1970	2000	1970	2000	1970	2000	1970	2000	1970	2000	1970	2000
Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic
Episcopal Church	LDS	Methodist	LDS	Episcopal Church	LDS	United Presbyterian	Jewish	Methodist	LDS	Methodist	LDS
American Lutheran	Independent Non Christian	Nazarene	ELCA	Lutheran Church of America	Assemblies of God	Methodist	LDS	Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	Intl. Foursquare Gospel	Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	Assemblies of God
Methodist	ELCA	United Presbyterian	Methodist	United Methodist	ELCA	Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	Indp. Charismatic	American Lutheran Church	ELCA	American Lutheran Church	Christian Church Churches of Christ
United Presbyterian	Christian Church & Churches of Christ	American Lutheran Church	Southern Baptist	United Presbyterian	Intl. Church of the Foursquare Gospel	Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	Intl. Foursquare	Episcopal Church	Christian Churches & Churches of Christ	Episcopal Church	Conservative Baptist
Christian Churches & Churches of Christ	Intl. Church of the Foursquare Gospel	Lutheran Church of America	Seventh Day Adventist	Seventh Day Adventist	Conservative Baptist	[Tied] Amer. Baptists/ Amer. Lutheran Church/ Seventh Day Adventist	ELCA	Seventh Day Adventist	Assemblies of God	[Tied] United Presbyterian /Seventh Day Adventist	Church of the Nazarene

Source: *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000*. Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 2002. See page 9 for definitions.

1,918,509, an increase of 78.27%. During the same three decades, the number of people in these counties claimed by religious bodies (adherents) grew from 347,455 to 717,245, or 37.39% of the population. This was a 5.1% increase over 1970's adherence rate of 32.29%. Significant effort and energy went into bringing the growing population into religious organizations and keeping them there. The result was a relatively modest increase in the overall adherence rate that was, however, attributable almost entirely to Multnomah County.

The 37.39% of the population inside the doors of religious organizations is not distributed evenly across the metro area. Of the six counties, only Multnomah and Clark in 2000 had adherence rates above thirty percent, 53.7% and 31.5% respectively ([www.religionatlas.org](http://www.religionatlas.org)). The remaining counties had adherence rates between 25% and 29%. Only Multnomah saw an increase in its religious adherence rate from 1970 to 2000, from 32.2% to 53.7%. This increase likely is the result of several factors, primarily the growth in the Catholic population. It also reflects a strengthening of Pentecostal and conservative evangelical Protestant churches that historically have had a strong presence there, as well as the recent growth in megachurches. Portland, Multnomah County's biggest city, also is the site

of renewed commitment and innovation among historic Protestant churches, and has the largest African American and Jewish populations among the six counties. Another factor may be the relatively slow growth in population in Multnomah County during this period. Clark remained stable, while Clackamas, Columbia, Washington, and Yamhill all saw decreases in the percentage of their populations claimed by religious organizations. The decreases occurred in the face of population increases of over 100% in Clackamas, Washington, and Yamhill, and over 50% in Columbia.

While the metro area's overall adherence level remained in the mid-30% range from 1970-2000, the relative size of the slices of the adherent pie changed significantly. The Catholic Church remains the single largest denomination in all six counties, as it was in 1970. However, its slice of the adherent pie grew only in Multnomah County, where it makes up over 42% of all adherents and nearly 23% of the population. In each of the other counties, Catholics comprise less than 10% of the population. The Catholic Church's share of the adherent pie remained steady in Clark County, and fell by half or more in the remaining four counties.



**A**cross all six counties the historic “mainline” Protestant denominations now have thinner slices of the adherent pie than they had in 1970. Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians retain the strongest presence, though no one of them has even 2% of the population of any of the six counties. They do, however, retain some affective allegiance from of the majority of people in the area who identify with a religious body but do not participate in a religious organization of that group. When combined, the historic Protestant denominations in size are equal to or slightly larger than the Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal family in each of the six counties.

Multnomah County is the only one with a significant presence of Jews. In no other county do they claim 1% of the population, though they are present in Clackamas, Clark and Washington. Historically African American Churches make up 4% of the population and 7.4% of the adherents in Multnomah County. Among the other counties only in Clark do they have more than 1% of the population.

Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) have grown significantly in the region over the past three decades. They now are the second largest denomination in all the counties of the Portland metro area except for Multnomah where they rank third behind Catholics and Jews.

Pentecostal denominations have grown significantly in all six counties. Beaverton Four Square, a Pentecostal congregation, is the largest of the metro area’s mega churches. As a group, Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal bodies capture 4-to-6% of the population in each of the six counties. Pentecostalism always has had a stronger presence in the area than in other regions of the country outside the South. Its portable theology of the Spirit’s presence and their worship – which evokes a visceral experience of the divine – have proved amenable to a mobile, questing people, both those who come into the region and those already here.

The area also has seen an increase in independent, non-denominational groups. These groups are characterized by a sophisticated facility with media, contemporary worship, “conservative” social values, and a traditional Protestant evangelical theology. Sociologist Donald Miller refers to this movement as “primitive postmodern” Christianity: “primitive” because they teach a version of Christianity in which biblical teachings are literally real, and

“postmodern” because of their command of media technology and flattened organizational structure that resembles businesses in the knowledge economy.

**U**mulatively the shifts in the adherent pie show the growth of religious groups that, historically, have been more sectarian in orientation and separate from the public square. In the past 30 years they have become more active politically. They bring to that activity a way of construing the relationship between personal religious convictions and the responsibilities of citizens in the public square that differs from the construal more familiar to those shaped by historic Protestant churches.

The growth of Pentecostal churches and other conservative Christians in the area, coupled with the decline in the numbers of historic mainline Protestants, helps to explain the metro area’s heightened religious tension. The relatively congenial alliance of the church (primarily historic Protestant mainline and Catholic) and un-churched that provided the area its public persona during the middle third of the twentieth century has been unraveling. It is not yet clear what will emerge in its place.

At the moment the area has two growing centers of religious gravity. One is spiritual environmentalism, to which many un-churched as well as liberal and moderate Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, as well as many Buddhists, atheists, and spiritual seekers are committed. The other is a socially conservative, theologically traditional, entrepreneurial Protestant evangelicalism. The former, according to sociologist Mark Shibley, has for some time served as the dominant religious reference group of the region. The latter, according to religionist James Wellman, is intent on claiming that role. The physical, social, and religious future of the area depends, in part, on whether a discourse useful for framing issues of public concern, and intelligible to both groups, emerges. Without a discourse that can bridge personal spiritual quests—Pentecostal, PETA, or EarthFirst!—to questions of the larger human and more than human common good, the dreams of a good life held by people inside and outside the doors of religious organizations in the metroscape will come to naught. **M**

*Dr. Patricia O’Connell Killen is professor of American Religions and chair of the Department of Religion, Pacific Lutheran University Tacoma, WA, and the primary editor of "Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone" (Alta Mira Press, 2004).*

